

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 3rd Sunday of Lent, March 4, 2018.

As have many of you, I have been to lots of staff meetings, including planning them, executing them, and summarizing them. Our lessons this morning remind me of a staff meeting with a pretty serious agenda. God, Paul and Jesus are not fooling around. They have summoned us and told us to sit down, be quiet, and listen.

The meeting begins with a reminder: the Collect for this morning. “Almighty God, who seest that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves.” This phrase sets the tone. As we listen to God, Paul and Jesus, we are told that we had better take seriously what they have to say, and act accordingly. That’s the framework.

When God speaks to Moses on Mt. Sinai (**Exodus 20:1-17**), God is speaking to us. This is the way things will be. “I am the Lord your God, and you shall have no other gods before me.” Period. End of discussion, except for this: “Here’s what I expect of you.” God then goes on to deliver to Moses what we know as the Ten Commandments. Not the Ten Options. Not the Ten Maybes. Not the Ten Temporaries. But the Ten Commandments. Obey, with an exclamation mark. Not a plea. Not a wish. A commandment.

Paul comes to the microphone next (**I Corinthians 1:18-25**). After hearing God speak, we are a little uneasy. We know that obedience to the Commandments is a tall order. We’ve tried, with results ranging from “pretty good” to “you must be kidding.” In fact, our efforts are so unimpressive that we’re tempted to dismiss the Commandments as “foolishness.” So how does Paul begin his part of the program? “The message about the Cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’”

Well, if we were thinking about raising our hand and pointing out to Paul that maybe our wisdom is better than his, we quickly lower our hand. And our hand remains down after hearing from Paul, “For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”

Our third speaker represents Jesus (**John 2:13-22**). John, the representative, reminds us of a Temple episode when Jesus loses it. He goes off the rails. He has had it with people abusing the sacred space of the Temple. "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market place!" His behavior prompts his audience to wonder if Jesus knows what he's doing. "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus is quick to respond: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The questioners are not sure what to make of this response. What they are sure of, though, is that this Jesus is not somebody to be messed with.

You can imagine that as people were dismissed from this meeting, the hallways were very quiet. No one wanted to be the first to respond. We've been to such meetings. Sometimes these meetings take place in auditoriums. Other times they take place around the kitchen table. Sometimes we have been the reminders. Other times we have been those put in our place.

When the chastised employees get back to their workstations, they find on their desk a copy of **Psalms 19**. This beautiful psalm reminds people that "the statutes of the Lord are just" and "the fear of the Lord is clean" and "the judgments of the Lord are true." The psalm ends with an appropriate response for the workers: "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, my strength and my redeemer."

Wow. Quite a meeting. A woodshed experience, at least to begin with. Probably not the first, and probably not the last. We are children of God, living in a confusing world. And, as such, we are praised sometimes and reprimanded other times. But through it all, we are God's children, and, as such, we are loved, we are forgiven, and we are raised to new life, as Christ was raised to new life.

What is missing from our meeting description is what was said before dismissal. Normally our Collect begins things, but today it could also be offered at the end of the meeting: "Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul."

A short version is “Ponder these things.” Which is exactly why we have a Season of Lent. It’s why we have today’s lessons.

And it’s why we have special refreshments today. Bread and wine are thoughtful nourishment. They remind us that God has expectations of us, but also understands that sometimes we will fall short. To address this human condition. Jesus comes on the scene. Fully human and fully divine. A fascinating combination that pulls us back from doubts and fears about our place in the Creation.

We might not have power in ourselves to save ourselves, but we have a God with that power, a God who could withhold salvation, but chooses instead to deliver it. Jesus, the agent of that salvation, can go off the rails at any time, but, when he does, it is always for a purpose, namely to remind us of what is really important and where true happiness is to be found.

This is foolishness for some people, but not for you and me. For you and me, “Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” It’s always good to end a staff meeting on a high note. A pep talk, if you will. But only after some pretty sobering reminders.

Here’s a familiar sobering reminder. For every team sport – and we’re a team – there are film days. Time to look back at the previous game or match and see what we did right and what we did wrong.

“Rowins, watch this closely. See number 98. On this play, he’s your man. Do you see who made the tackle? Number 98. Any questions?” “No, Sir.”

Well, our version of Film Day is the Season of Lent. Welcome to the staff meeting. Hold on tight. And remember, it’s all for the good.

Amen.

